

# CIA task force chief testifies of effort to stay legal, loyal

By Mary Belcher  
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

The CIA's point man on Central America silently backed his superiors last fall when they misled Congress about U.S. involvement in arming the Nicaraguan resistance, according to transcripts released yesterday.

Alan Fiers, CIA Central American task force chief, privately told the Iran-Contra investigative committee Aug. 5 that administration officials provided "cute" but incomplete answers to Congress last October, when a private supply plane carrying Eugene Hasenfus was shot down in Nicaragua.

"My frame of mind was to protect, was to be a member of the team, not to get out ahead, to try to get through this ... and to do it without lying," Mr. Fiers said, explaining why he did not speak up when CIA Deputy Director Clair George before the House Intelligence Committee denied any U.S. involvement in the Hasenfus mission.

"So long as others who knew the details as much as I, who knew more than I, were keeping their silence on this, I was going to keep my silence," he said.

Assistant Secretary of State Elliott Abrams joined Mr. Fiers and Mr. George in their appearance before Congress last Oct. 14.

The CIA began sharing logistical information with private arms suppliers early in 1986, after Congress relaxed restrictions on intelligence-sharing. But neither Mr. George nor Mr. Fiers acknowledged that last fall.

Mr. Fiers also denied knowing about Lt. Col. Oliver North's role in assisting the rebel forces.

"I knew that he was quarterbacking them, and what I was saying there was I did not know the depth of his involvement and if he was specifically funding them," he said. "I was being, frankly, technically correct, specifically evasive."

Mr. Fiers' testimony did not set well with the Iran-Contra committee, which has heard admissions from other officials that they misled Congress about their involvement with the Nicaraguan resistance.

"I believe that half the truth is also

half a lie," said Sen. William Cohen, Maine Republican. He said officials apparently engaged in a "conspiracy of silence," agreeing "not to be the first one to step forward."

But Mr. Fiers — who assumed his current CIA post in October 1984 when Congress banned aid to the resistance — said he was caught in a "giant nutcracker" between the legislative and executive branches of government.

He said he tried to remain within the legal strictures imposed on the CIA by Congress. He said he shared top-secret information with Col. North, but he did not know he was passing it on to the Nicaraguan resistance.

"There is very little ... that happened in Central America that I didn't talk to Ollie about," Mr. Fiers said.

Mr. Fiers, Col. North and Mr. Abrams were members of the Restricted Interagency Group, or RIG, that dealt with Central America.

He disputed testimony by Lewis Tambs, former U.S. ambassador to Costa Rica, who said the group gave him marching orders to "open" a southern fighting front for the Nicaraguan resistance from his diplomatic post in San Jose.

Mr. Fiers admitted, however, that he did become "too rambunctious" in aiding Nicaraguan supply operations in the spring of 1986, when Congress lifted intelligence-sharing restrictions. By April, he had "pulled back," having been warned of the political volatilities by CIA attorneys, he said.

In July 1986, he wrote former CIA Costa Rican station chief Joe Fernandez a memo intended as an order to stop informing private suppliers about the needs and whereabouts of resistance forces.

"He was next to a totally degenerate situation that was just like over-boiled spaghetti," Mr. Fiers said. "I told him to watch himself, to keep it legal."

Mr. Fernandez, who went by the alias Tomas Castillo, told the Iran-Contra committee earlier that he interpreted the memo as an effort by his superiors to distance themselves from his duties, while not actually relieving him of them.

Mr. Fiers said he found himself in

uncomfortable situations as well.

He said he was particularly "p.o'd" about an August 1986 meeting he attended in the office of Donald Gregg, who is national security adviser to Vice President George Bush.

He said Mr. Gregg and others advised him not to buy retired Air Force Maj. Gen. Richard Secord's air-supply operation, if and when the CIA resumed an active role in aiding the Nicaraguan resistance. He said Mr. Gregg also tried to sell him on the merits of Felix Rodriguez, a former CIA agent who helped coordinate supply missions out of El Salvador.

"I just didn't want to be there and hear what was being said and get into a debate over the efficacies or the pros and cons, the pedigrees of whoever the private benefactors were," Mr. Fiers said.

"I didn't want to be pressed ... to associate myself with Felix Rodriguez. I didn't want to be pressed to sort of buy airplanes or to comment on buying airplanes or not buying airplanes," he said.

Mr. Fiers said he did not learn of the diversion of Iranian arms sales proceeds to the Nicaraguan resistance until it was made public last Nov. 25.

He said he heard hints of it 10 days earlier, on a trip to Central America with CIA Director William Casey. He said a CIA courier told him — not in Mr. Casey's presence — that more money apparently was paid for the weapons than "came out," but he did not pursue the matter.

Col. North has testified that Mr. Casey, who died in May, approved the diversion. But Mr. Casey told Mr. Fiers that he did not know where funding for the Nicaraguan resistance was coming from during a lull in U.S. aid in the spring of 1986.

Mr. Fiers said the director could be inscrutable.

"At one point in time, I was in his office and he said ... 'So-and-so said that I had terminal cancer. Isn't that preposterous? Isn't that the most ludicrous thing you heard? Do I look like a man with cancer?'"

"I said, 'No, you don't.' Well, he did [have cancer]. And I had no idea. So I mean the man — I just don't know what to make of it."